The Disabled Student Commitment

Disabled Students' Commission

Acknowledgments

The Disabled Students' Commission would like to express its heartfelt thanks to all of the sector bodies, organisations and individuals for their comments and contributions which have helped shape the Commitment, and whom have worked closely with us for the last three years.

Our particular thanks go to Amy Norton and colleagues at the Office for Students, and Dominic Kingaby at the Department of Education. The Commitment has been finalised by Professor Geoff Layer and the Commissioners, with support from the Secretariat at Advance HE, comprising of current and former colleagues, Hannah Borkin, Anne Rowan, Ellen Pugh, David Bass and Gary Loke.

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Preface

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) was established by the Universities Minister and funded by the Office for Students (OfS) just before the Covid-19 pandemic struck in early 2020. Since then, the DSC has listened very carefully to the views of disabled students and the many skilled colleagues who support them. We have used a rigorous methodology of secondary research, roundtables, focus groups, surveys and one-to-one discussions. Our research shows that there are many committed staff who support disabled students and numerous examples of innovative practice across the sector but unfortunately, typically there is not a holistic approach across the provider.

Since our inception, we have looked at the evidence presented to us and clearly taken the view that whilst disabled students do remarkably well, too often it is against the odds. The sector needs to make a quantum shift in the way it supports this group of students.

During the various Covid-19 lockdowns and subsequent periods of transition, it was clear that many of the changes put in place benefitted disabled students. Indeed, one clear comment we received was:

> *"If all of the above changes were possible in a short space of time, why is it that disabled students were previously refused when they had been requesting the same for years?"* - Covid-19 Roundtable participant

Progress was being made, for example, on the recording of lectures, access to extenuating circumstances and flexibility in assessment processes. However, we need to ensure that these are not just temporary changes, and that we now do not go backwards. We need to enshrine some of the changes for the benefit of our most vulnerable students. We need to create a sense of belonging in which students are able to focus on what they went to higher education for and not spend untold hours fighting their way through the system.

Through our research, disabled students told us that they wanted four things:

+ **communication**
+ **consistency**
+ **certainty**
+ **choice.**

Consequently, we have developed this Disabled Student Commitment, and it is a call to the sector and sector bodies to make the step change that is required to create a more inclusive environment. The Commitment calls on Higher Education Providers (HEPs), Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to look at what they currently do, what innovative practice they can share, and how they can change. All of these organisations have legal duties towards disabled students. The Commitment does not seek to replicate or replace legal duties but asks organisations to do more by focusing on how they can improve the disabled student experience.

It is for HEPs and other organisations to determine the steps that they will take, the timescale they will adopt and how they will direct resources towards their fulfilment of the Commitment. However, it is clear that there needs to be a champion within the senior management team driving change and resolving issues. In particular, we call upon all HEPs to work collectively with their disabled students and to develop an implementation plan. Similarly, it is for Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies to address their approaches to fulfilling the Commitment.

Specifically, the Commission calls upon the OfS and the Department of Education (DfE) to reflect on and communicate how they intend to keep under review support for disabled students in higher education and disabled student outcomes.

The Commitment is applicable to all students irrespective of level or mode of study. Based on direct consultation with disabled students, we have tried to be inclusive in respect of language and vocabulary, and clearly, consideration of intersectionality and multiple conditions should be at the forefront of the Commitment.

Finally, we recognise that while changes are afoot in the sector, for example with the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) and changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance, it was agreed that the Commitment should reflect the current HE context as we await further information.

We urge you to adopt the Commitment to ensure better support for our students. They deserve this step change.

Chair of the Disabled Students' Commission

The Disabled Student Commitment

1. Introduction

The purpose of the Disabled Student Commitment (the Commitment) is to secure an enhanced and improved experience for disabled students within higher education. The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) calls upon higher education providers (HEPs), Government, funders, agencies, regulators and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (henceforth referred to as other organisations) to adopt and promote the Commitment.

The experience of higher education is at its best when there is a partnership between students, staff and HEPs. To help ensure effective collaboration, it is important that disabled students at all stages of their engagement with higher education fully share information about their condition and give consent for the HEP and course funder to use that information appropriately.

The Commitment is designed to be a self-regulatory tool, and the DSC recognises that HEPs and other organisations are not immediately able to implement the Commitment in its entirety. Some actions to fulfil the Commitment will need to be phased and for this reason, the DSC encourages the development of a delivery plan to fulfil the aspiration of the Commitment.

To help develop an effective delivery plan, the Commitment firstly encourages HEPs and other organisations to work in consultation with their disabled students to look holistically at their practices and policies to evaluate how they meet the Commitment, and then to outline how they intend to enhance the disabled student experience.

HEPs should agree a statement based on joint work with their disabled students, outlining how much progress has been made with the implementation of the Commitment. This should be published in an updated form annually on their website, alongside a logo of the Commitment (provided by the DSC) displayed in the appropriate places, with disabled students and applicants encouraged to look for this.

The Commitment first establishes expectations for information sharing and consent. The Commitment then guides the reader through four key touchpoints of the higher education journey and outlines the commitments that the DSC suggest HEPs and other organisations should make.

2. Requests to share information

The sharing or disclosure of information is a key touch point for students. It is important that this is viewed as a positive step as part of the student experience. The DSC recognises that HEPs and other providers have a range of record systems, but often the systems do not work together, resulting in repeated requests for information. The disabled student view is very clear that they find it frustrating, off-putting and disrespectful to be repeatedly asked to share the same information about their disability.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

1. Over time, students are asked only once to share information about their disability during their course of study. Students may want to update the information shared and should have opportunities to do so during their course, for the purpose of ensuring appropriate reasonable adjustments are in place.
2. If a disabled student is required to share information more than once about their disability, it should be for the purpose of ensuring appropriate support is provided and not be a request to provide further evidence of their disability.
3. Explicit student consent is in place before information about their disability and the adjustments they require are shared between staff, departments and services within the provider. Where a student chooses not to provide consent, steps are taken to ensure that they understand the implications of their decision for the support that can be provided.
4. Open channels of communication are in place, to help create appropriate and timely information sharing across the provider with relevant individuals and departments.

The Commitment also calls upon:

5. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Education (DfE) to support and promote the roll-out and expansion of the disability passport scheme across the sector, building on the evaluation of the pilot programmes, as soon as practically possible.
6. HEPs to support and promote the disability passport, and to be aware of the evaluation of the pilot programmes and their impact on disabled students.
7. DfE and the Student Loans Company (SLC) to explore how a student's existing support assessment from a school or college can be used for the purposes of a needs assessment for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) thus avoiding delays and supporting a seamless transition for the learner.

3. Choosing a course of study

It is important that all applicants and students fully understand and engage with the nature of the course that they wish to study. However, it is even more crucial that a disabled student understands how the course will be delivered and the support available to enable them to succeed, given the barriers they may face.

A range of organisations and service providers, not just those based in the higher education sector, have a responsibility to provide consistent information, advice and guidance (IAG) on higher education, and they all need to ensure that disabled students are considered within this.

The Commitment calls upon:

8. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to commit to improving and extending their existing IAG on higher education for disabled applicants and enhancing personalisation through the Hub to support informed decision-making.

9. All UK funders of higher education courses and research programmes to ensure that disabled applicants are able to access IAG on the support available to disabled students on the higher education programmes that they fund.

10. Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) to commit to producing IAG focusing on the nature and breadth of employment opportunities, and the support available to disabled students graduating from programmes or courses that meet professional standards.

11. HEPs and other organisations to commit to ensuring that IAG on the support that is available to disabled applicants and students is accessible to all, and not just to those who have shared that they are disabled or have engaged with their disability services.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

12. Comprehensive IAG is provided to applicants and students about how they support disabled students. The IAG should endeavour to acknowledge potential barriers in the delivery of education and services such as information technology, libraries, wellbeing, catering and accommodation, linked to the provision of individual support plans.

13. Outreach strategies and plans have a specific disability focus, including ensuring that the staff delivering outreach activity are aware of how to support disabled participants. The OfS is encouraged to continue to support this approach.

14. Open days are accessible to disabled applicants, and disabled parents and carers of applicants, and that all relevant information on accessibility is shared in advance.

4. Transition into the higher education community

First experiences within a new community are crucial in enabling integration and establishing a sense of belonging. This is particularly the case for disabled students entering higher education for the first time.

It is important that HEPs, student unions and guilds work collaboratively to support disabled students' transition into higher education and to ensure that they can participate confidently in all activities. Often, disabled students face unintended barriers from the very beginning, simply because of institutional and sector body decision-making processes which may not have fully considered their needs.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

15. Senior leadership teams work collectively in co-production with disabled students and staff to ensure that decision-making processes are as transparent as possible.
16. Policies and practices are consistent with the principles of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA)'s Good Practice Framework.
17. Policies and practices are developed with the breadth of the disabled student population in mind, including degree apprentices, postgraduate students and students on access courses.
18. All students have been made aware of the support available within their provider and understand how to provide information on their disability and communicate any associated support requirements.
19. All disabled students have access to a needs assessment, should they wish, with a co-created support plan developed and implemented in a timely manner, and fully understood by the staff responsible for its delivery.
20. Provided a student has shared their disability and a needs assessment has taken place, their support requirements are in place on day one of their course in line with an agreed support plan.
21. The needs and support requirements of disabled students are met during welcome activities and induction processes.
22. Disabled students can access all facilities, including education buildings for their lectures and seminars, and have suitable accommodation. In addition, that graduation ceremonies are accessible.

The Commitment also calls upon:

23. Students' unions and Guilds to ensure that their facilities are accessible and that all clubs and societies address the needs and support requirements of disabled students.

24. HEPs to pursue opportunities that provide insight into the experience of their disabled students, such as of membership of Disabled Students' UK's Access Insights Project.

5. On-course experience

It is vital that we create a culture in which all students can excel in higher education. For disabled students to excel, their needs and support requirements should be met so that they can fully engage with their learning and achieve positive outcomes without unnecessary and stressful distraction.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

25. Inclusive practice is embedded in curriculum design. This will help to ensure that anticipatory reasonable adjustments are provided with consistency and certainty in the delivery of learning, teaching and assessment.
26. Where students are required to undertake an assessment, there is choice in the form of assessment methods used wherever possible and where appropriate, with regards to the competencies and skills being assessed.
27. All staff teaching and staff supporting a disabled student understand the student's support requirements, are provided with training and can access guidance.
28. Placement providers are aware of and implement a disabled student's access and support requirements prior to the commencement of a placement.
29. Extenuating circumstances, complaints and appeal policies do not require disabled students to re-share information that evidences their disability and indicates how issues experienced by disabled students will be addressed.
30. The mental health and wellbeing of disabled students is prioritised through a whole institution approach.
31. Disabled students are encouraged to develop advocacy skills, facilitated through training and/or mentoring, to enable them to be more fully integrated into student life and to be able to clearly articulate their needs.

The Commitment also calls upon:

32. Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) to support Subject Benchmark Statement (SBS) Advisory Groups in exploring how key competences can be identified in all the Statements, and similarly to support both SBS Advisory Groups and PSRBs to consider appropriate flexibility in teaching, learning and assessment.

33. Advance HE to ensure that supporting disabled student learning is embedded in the guidance for the award of a Fellowship.

6. Moving forward

Moving out of studying and into employment is a crucial step for disabled students, and yet this is where the biggest gap in outcomes exists.

The Commitment calls upon HEPs to ensure that:

34. Careers and employment guidance acknowledges the barriers that may be experienced by disabled students, and emphasis and consideration are given to the positive attributes and skills that disabled students will have developed during their time at university.
35. The relationships built with employers include recognition of opportunities for disabled students and graduates.
36. Disability specific support in preparation for employment and the recruitment process is provided.
37. Employability activities are referenced whilst on course and embedded throughout the student life cycle.

The Commitment also calls upon:

38. DWP to work with HEPs and employers to support the planned roll-out of the disability passport scheme into employment.
39. DWP to promote better understanding among students and higher education careers advisers of the available funding for reasonable adjustments in employment and promote Access to Work to disabled students.
40. Sector-focused Disability Access Ambassadors are asked to encourage their sector to provide frameworks/routes to employment for disabled graduates.
41. Employer organisations to commit to producing accessible information focused on the nature of the role and the support for disabled employees so that disabled applicants and students can make informed choices about future employment.
42. Employer organisations are asked to promote the benefits of providing placements for disabled students, apprentices and employing disabled graduates.

Finally, the Commitment encourages the following:

43. For the Business Disability Forum to share the emerging findings and outputs with the OfS on the next iteration of The Great Big Workplace Adjustments Survey.

Appendix 1: About the Disabled Students' Commission

The Disabled Students' Commission (DSC) is an independent and strategic group with a key priority to advise, inform and influence English higher education providers (HEPs) and sector bodies to improve support for disabled students. Its aim is to help the sector achieve more positive outcomes for disabled students in relation to access, participation, success and progression.

The creation of the DSC was announced in June 2019 by former Universities Minister Chris Skidmore, and established in March 2020. It is funded by the OfS and is supported by a secretariat provided by Advance HE for a period of three years.

The DSC challenges, influences and supports the Department for Education, the OfS, HEPs and other relevant sector organisations to accelerate the pace of change in creating inclusive learning and living environments for disabled students across the student life cycle.

The Commissioners were appointed through a public appointments process run by the OfS, and comprise:

- Professor Geoff Layer – Chair of the DSC , Adviser to the Vice Chancellor Coventry University and formerly Vice Chancellor University of Wolverhampton
- John Blake (OfS Commissioner) – Director for Fair Access and Participation, The Office for Students
- Susan Daniels (Commissioner) – Chief Executive, National Deaf Children's Society
- Professor Sarah Greer (Commissioner) – Vice-Chancellor, University of Winchester
- Patrick Johnson (Commissioner) – Director of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, University of Law
- Professor Deborah Johnston (Commissioner) – Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic Framework), London South Bank University
- Piers Wilkinson (Student Voice Commissioner) – Disability Adviser and Consultant
- Sean Cullen (Student Voice Commissioner) – Doctoral researcher, Brunel University
- Sam Parrett (Further Education Adviser) – CEO, London and South East Education Group

John Blake succeeds Chris Millward, previous Director for Fair Access and Participation at the OfS and DSC Commissioner, who left his post in December 2022. Further information about the DSC, its Terms of Reference and its work to date can be found on the DSC's campaign page at www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusion/disability-equality-higher-education/disabled-students-commission.

Appendix 2: References

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